MAUREEN PALEY.

Mclaughlin, Rosanna, Reviews, Frieze, Summer 2018, p. 190.

KAYE DONACHIE
Maureen Paley, London, & Morena di Luna, Hove, UK

Leaning against a pillar at Maureen Paley in London and gazing at the titular portrait of Kaye Donachie’s exhibition, ‘Silent as Glass’ (all works 2018), I realize I’m crushing. Hard. The cause of my condition is a young woman painted in oils on linen. Her skin is the colour of pale rose, her neck bathed in shadows of deep water blue. Her lips, like lips kissed for too long, look bruised around the edges.

‘Silent as Glass’ is the first installment of a two-part exhibition by the British painter, her first solo show in the UK since 2013. Donachie’s portraits are influenced by modern heroines, real and fictional. The poet and bonne vivante Iris Tree is named as inspiration – the painting Sighs of Amber is based upon a photograph of Tree taken by Man Ray in 1920 – as is the writer Katherine Mansfield. While these figures may be associated with the avant-garde, the fantasy in which they’re couched is closer to the slender, dewy-eyed femininity beloved of pre-Raphaelites. Imagine John William Waterhouse’s nymphs clothed and dried, and Hylas banished, and you’re halfway there.

The emotional pull of Donachie’s portraits is largely the effect of her brushwork, which she executes in the manner of the pining lover, returning to a subject’s features as if unable to let them alone. A palette of sunsets and midnights adds to the mood of yearning. Not all of the work on view is straight-up portraiture: Young Moon is hung against a purple and black digital collage. The loose, abstract pattern looks like something you might find in the sketchbooks of Eileen Grey: an ébouche of a rug or screen for a high-modern interior. In Delinious Verses and We Together – two still lifes hung on a wall painted navy – female silhouettes merge with bouquets of flowers.

The second installment of the exhibition, ‘Like This, Before. Like Waves’, at Morena di Luna in Hove, takes its title from Ann Quin’s novel Three (1966). Quin committed suicide a mile from the site of Morena di Luna in 1973, drowning herself off the end of Brighton’s Palace Pier. Three is set in the aftermath of the death of a young woman named ‘S’, who had taken up residence with a married couple. Like Donachie’s fantastical dead, ‘S’ becomes an intoxicating presence – an apparition fabricated from hazy memories, diary fragments and the longings of the living.

There are moments in this show when death threatens to reclaim its citizens. In The Eclipse That Settled, the woman’s eyes, nose and mouth are painted with dark strokes. They stand out against her bloodless complexion and suggest the cavities of the skull. There are moments, too, when I feel the works’ spell temporarily weaken. The romance of Light Steaks, an elegant, art deco-inflected painting of a hand and orb, for instance, is too familiar to incite my ardour.

The spell strengthens as I search the face of the dark-haired girl with her eyes closed in The Truth That Hongs. As I follow the buttercup yellow that illuminates her eyelids and makes slim, bright triangles down her cheeks, I realize that none of Donachie’s women meet the eye. There is no Olympia to check me for staring, nor does the usual shadow of the painter’s “male gaze” distract from the works’ rare beauty. At the sight of Our Tears for Smiles I’m captivated by a woman with cropped black hair, painted like a dauphin in regal shadows of old burgundy and dark marine. Her lashes and nose have been petted with brushstrokes, an action I happily repeat with my eyes. Donachie’s portraits make a lover of the viewer. On parting, I immediately wish to return.

Rosanna Mclaughlin

This page
Kaye Donachie, I That Know You, 2018, oil on linen, 61 x 46 cm